

## Working Together to Save Our Languages

March is Aboriginal Languages Month and March 31, is Aboriginal Languages Day so I decided, during this special time set aside by our people, to share some thoughts about keeping our languages alive. After all, our languages are our most valuable resource and as noted by Joshua Fishman, "Language is the mind, spirit and soul of a people".

The importance of language as an expression of culture, of who we are as a people, must be upheld by each individual, each family, each community and each nation. Every effort must be made to protect, preserve, promote and practice our Aboriginal languages. We must gather into the circle all the knowledge, wisdom and energy we possess to ensure their survival.

Our people, throughout Canada, have faced many challenges in an effort to maintain the vitality of our respective languages in accordance with "the natural order of the Creator". This continuing challenge, to save our languages from further deterioration, can take many forms. The following are ten suggestions for consideration:

1. We must bank our languages. To save what remains of our languages, it is crucial that we preserve our languages immediately by recording on audio or video (CD-ROM) all of our fluent speakers, most of whom are our Elders. We must capture the purest oral form of our languages to ensure that they will be available to future generations.

According to the linguists, at the current rate of decline, only four of our original 60 Aboriginal languages in Canada have a reasonable chance of surviving over the next century. Cree, along with Ojibwa, Inuktitut and Dakota are the languages predicted to survive. The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples reported that Cree speakers make up 43% of all those with an Aboriginal mother tongue. While this may be a reflection of the population, it nonetheless presents a frightening picture of the remaining Aboriginal languages. For those of us who are Cree, it is difficult for us to take any great comfort in this fact. As we experience the steady decline of our fluent speakers, and see fewer and fewer of the younger generation speaking the Cree language.

2. To save our languages, there is a need to ensure that there is an awareness and concern about retaining our languages. To do this, we must ensure that every Aboriginal man, woman and child knows of their oppression. We must know how the oppressors "stole" our languages and cultures through both residential and day schools; how the Indian Act has conspired to destroy our identity; and how all this has contributed to the weakening of Aboriginal peoples and their communities. The impact of years of brainwashing must be revealed and understood.

We must ensure that every Aboriginal man, woman and child knows the affect language has in our lives. Language is what gives us our identity and expresses our unique world view. Language is the ultimate symbol of belonging. It is through language that culture is shared and transmitted. Without our Aboriginal languages we are not remaining true to "the

natural order of the Creator". At the 1988 Aboriginal Language Policy Conference, Grand Chief Mike Mitchell related these words of his grandfather:

"What would happen to the Creator's law if the robin couldn't sing its song anymore? We would feel very bad. We would understand that something snapped in nature's law. What would happen if you saw a robin and you heard a different song, if it was singing the song of the sea gull? You would say, robin that's not your language; that's not your song".

To this Chief Mitchell added, "It was not meant for us to lose our language; we broke the cycle, and today we have nothing to stand on if our language is going to die."

3. We must make the best use of our resources. The most important and valuable resource we have to save our languages today is our human resource. Our speakers of the language, whether totally or marginally fluent, are the key to enabling us to maintain the "Creator's natural order".

The revitalization of a language depends upon the will of its speakers. To set up a language bank, for instance, it will take speakers who may not consider themselves to be fluent but have sufficient command of the language to interview the more fluent speakers. The onus and responsibility falls on the youngest generation of speakers who have the education, vitality and stamina to do what is needed to save our languages. Ways and means must be found to enable them to play an active role in revitalizing our languages.

The other critical resource needed is money. Last year the federal government announced that it was making \$20 million (over four years) available for Aboriginal languages. It appears that the allotment for this year is \$2.2 million and it is being distributed in February 1999 to be spent by March 31, 1999. Why? Well, it took a long, long time to decide who should disperse the money. At the end of the day, the hardship falls on those who received grants to make productive use of the dollars in less than two months. We can only hope that the allotment of around \$4.4 million for the next fiscal year is more efficiently made available to our communities for the critical work that has to be done..

4. We must provide training and certification. To save our languages, we must have appropriate, certifiable training programs available to enable our people to become language teachers, linguists, interpreters, translators, curriculum developers and researchers.

It is not sufficient to have language training workshops or short courses. It is not sufficient to have isolated courses provided by various colleges or universities. It is not sufficient to include even a range of courses in a degree in Native Studies, education or any other degree. What is required is a full scale certificate, degree or diploma in Aboriginal languages or even better in an Aboriginal language or language family.

5. We must develop a comprehensive and appropriate curriculum. Curriculum development is necessary if we are to be successful in passing on the language from

generation to generation. It is only through passing the language on from parent to child that languages can truly survive. If two successive generations do not speak the language, it will be lost if there is no planned intervention. A community approach to developing language curriculum would be the most effective way to ensure that there is an opportunity for everyone to get involved in learning the language. It cannot be left up to the schools. It must be a family/community responsibility.

The Aboriginal community must take the lead and be prepared to be actively involved in planning and implementing language programs. Only the people of the community are able to put the plan into an appropriate context. The plan must be based on the philosophy of the people and the goals must be clearly stated by them. For example, is the goal to be able to speak the language? Is it to learn to read and write the language? How will this be done stage by stage? Who will be the teachers? What materials will be required? What teaching methods will be used? How will progress be assessed?

6. We must do the necessary research. The purpose of research is to find answers to questions. This may well be the most critical area that must be addressed if we are to save our languages. The most glaring is the need to research successful/effective models of language renewal.

In an article entitled "At a Loss for Words" written by Stephen Hume in the Vancouver Sun (May 2, 1998), he writes "Why were the Hungarians able to preserve their language for over 5,000 years despite repeated reinvention of their original culture and social structure ...? Why is Welsh undergoing an explosive renaissance among teenagers and young adults?" How have the Hebrew in Israel, the Catalan in Spain, the Maori in New Zealand successfully rescued their languages from near extinction? Knowing the answers to these questions would provide us with a some understanding and direction to addressing our situation.

We have to get inside our language for deeper meaning. As Earle Claxton stated in Hume's article "The more you get into language, the more you get to the very heart of the culture and spirit". How words/sentences are constructed gives us information about our culture, our way of thinking. How our stories were told, how knowledge was imparted, all shed light on who we are as a people. How often have we said, "It is difficult to translate this into English". That tells us that there is a uniqueness to our language. Only by expanding our knowledge about our languages can we begin a meaningful process of language revival and preservation.

7. Canadian society as a whole must be informed about the state of our languages. Articles, such as the one by Stephen Hume in the Vancouver Sun, must appear in all forms of media. While non-Aboriginal advocates write articles, books, give interviews, there is a need for us, as Aboriginal people, to do more to promote an understanding of the state of our languages to the general public. We, too, could place articles in magazines and newspapers and take advantage of radio or television talk shows to get our message out.

Public opinion is important to influencing government support. The more understanding there is about the critical state of our languages, the reasons for this problem and our efforts to save our languages, the greater the empathy will be for our situation.

8. We must stop using artificial boundaries. When it comes to saving our languages, we must use the "natural order of the Creator" approach. That is, we must not follow boundaries which have no significance to language. Basing Aboriginal languages within provincial and territorial boundaries makes little sense when, for example, the Cree span at least six provinces, the Sioux, at least two and on into the United States. Working within these boundaries creates duplication of effort and resources.

The "natural order of the Creator" suggests that we should use the eleven language families that have been identified as a starting point. Surely, the family should make decisions about its future. Just as in the real world, the language families vary in size with Algonkian and Athapaskan being the largest and the six language families in British Columbia being the smallest. This approach to saving our language would ensure that our efforts are more concentrated, with more sharing of resources, both human and financial.

9. We must press for Aboriginal language legislation. It is the position of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada that the protection and use of our languages is an inherent right, a treaty right, a constitutional right, an Aboriginal right as well as a human right. There is both a legal and a moral obligation for the Government of Canada to recognize our language rights. There are precedents for legislation (NWT, United States, New Zealand) to protect and maintain indigenous languages.

The First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres has proposed an Aboriginal Languages Act with a provision for an Aboriginal Languages Foundation. The Act would bring into law the recognition of the rights and freedom of Aboriginal peoples to use, protect, revitalize, and maintain their languages. The Act would include a provision for the appropriation of funds through the establishment of an incorporated, endowed Aboriginal Languages Foundation.

10. WE MUST WORK TOGETHER. To accomplish the previous nine suggestions as to how we might save our languages, we must work together whether it be as a family, a community or on a national level. We must take stock of where we stand in respect to our languages. If we are "for saving our languages", then we must assess what each of us is prepared to do about it. Is it going to be a family effort? How can our commitment/passion become a community effort? Are we willing to help to get the language family together to make long range decisions about the languages?

We do not have any time to lose. We, as Aboriginal people, must get behind the work that has been done over the last twenty-five years and support and accelerate these efforts in a coordinated way. We must engage in a common strategy to make our languages living, vibrant languages once again. When this happens, we will be following the "natural order of the Creator" and we can expect a better life for ourselves and for future generations.  
Ekosi.